
The Anarchy of Colored Girls
Assembled in a Riotous Manner
SAIDIYA HARTMAN

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# Esther

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did not write a political tract on the refusal to be governed, or draft a plan for mutual aid or outline a memoir of her sexual adventures. A manifesto of the wayward—*Own Nothing. Refuse the Given. Live on What You Need and No More. Get Ready to Be Free*—was not found among the items contained in her case file. She didn't pen any song lines: *My mama says I'm reckless, My daddy says I'm wild, I ain't good looking, but I'm somebody's angel child*. She didn't commit to paper her ruminations on freedom: *With human nature caged in a narrow space, whipped daily into submission, how can we speak of potentialities*? The cardboard placards for the tumult and upheaval she incited might have said: "Don't mess with me. I am not afraid to smash things up." But hers was a struggle without formal declarations of policy, slogan, or credos. It required no party platform or ten point program. Walking through the streets of New York City, she and Emma Goldman crossed

paths, but failed to recognize each other. When Hubert Harrison encountered her in the lobby of the Renaissance Casino after he delivered his lectures on "Marriage versus Free Love" for the Socialist Club, he noticed only that she had a pretty face and a big ass. Esther Brown never pulled a soapbox onto the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to make a speech about autonomy, the global reach of the color line, involuntary servitude, free motherhood, or the promise of a future world, but she well understood that the desire to move as she wanted was nothing short of treason. She knew firsthand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free. To wander through the streets of Harlem, to want better than what she had, and to be propelled by her whims and desires was to be ungovernable. Her way of living was nothing short of anarchy.

Had anyone ever found the rough notes for reconstruction jotted in the marginalia of her grocery list or correlated the numbers circled most often in her dog-eared dream book with routes of escape not to be found in McNally's Atlas or seen the love letters written to her girlfriend about how they would live at the end of the world, the master philosophers and

cardholding radicals, in all likelihood, would have said that her analysis was insufficient, dismissed her for failing to understand those key passages in the *Grundrisse* about the ex-slave's refusal to work—*they have ceased to be slaves, but not in order to become wage labourers*—she nodded in enthusiastic agreement at all the wrong places—*content with producing only what is strictly necessary for their own consumption*—and embraced *indulgence and idleness as the real luxury good*; all of which emphasized the limits of black feminist politics. What did they know of Truth and Tubman? Or the contours of black women's war against the state and capital? Could they ever understand the dreams of another world which didn't trouble the distinction between man, settler, and master? Or recounted the struggle against servitude, captivity, property, and enclosure that began in the barracoon and continued on the ship, where some fought, some jumped, some refused to eat. Others set the plantation and the fields on fire, poisoned the master. They had never listened to Lucy Parsons; they had never read Ida B. Wells. Or envisioned the riot as a rally cry and refusal of fungible life? Only a misreading of the key texts of anarchism could ever imagine a place for wayward


Harriet Tubman

colored girls. No, Kropotkin never described black women's mutual aid societies or the chorus in *Mutual Aid*, although he imagined animal sociality in its rich varieties and the forms of cooperation and mutuality found among ants, monkeys, and ruminants. Impossible, recalcitrant domestics weren't yet in his radar or anyone else's. (It would be a decade and a half before Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke wrote their essay "The Bronx Slave Market" and two decades before Claudia Jones's "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman.")

It is not surprising that a *negress* would be guilty of conflating idleness with resistance or exalting the struggle for mere survival or confuse petty acts for insurrection or imagine a minor figure might be capable of some significant shit or mistaking laziness and inefficiency for a general strike or recasting theft as a kind of cheap socialism for too-fast girls and questionable women or esteem wild ideas as radical thought. At best, the case of Esther Brown provides another example of the tendency to exaggeration and excess that is common to the race. A revolution in a minor key was hardly noticeable before the spirit of Bolshevism or the nationalist vision of a Black Empire or the glamour of wealthy libertines, fashionable

socialists, and self-declared New Negroes. Nobody remembers the evening she and her friends raised hell on 132nd Street or turned out Edmund's Cellar or made such a beautiful noise during the riot that their screams and shouts were improvised music, so that even the tone-deaf journalists from the *New York Times* described the black noise of disorderly women as a jazz chorus.

## Wayward Experiments

Esther Brown hated to work, the conditions of work as much as the very idea of work. Her reasons for quitting said as much. Housework: *Wages too small*. Laundry work: *Too hard*. Ran away. General Housework: *Tired of work*. Laundress: *Too hard*. Sewing buttons on shirts: *Tired of work*. Dishwasher: *Tired of work*. Housework: *Man too cross*. Live-in-service: I might as well be a slave. At age fifteen, when she left school, she experienced the violence endemic to domestic work and tired quickly of the demand to care for others who didn't care for you. She ran the streets because nowhere else in the world was there anything for her. She stayed in the streets to escape

the suffocation of her mother's small apartment, which was packed with lodgers, men who took up too much space and who were too easy with their hands. She had been going around and mixing it up for a few years, but only because she liked doing it. She never went with men *only* for money. She was no prostitute. After the disappointment of a short-lived marriage to a man who wasn't her baby's father (he had offered to marry her but she rejected him), she went to live with her sister and grandmother and they helped her raise her son. She had several lovers to whom she was bound by need and want, not by the law.

Esther's only luxury was idleness and she was fond of saying to her friends, "If you get up in the morning and feel tired, go back to sleep and then go to the theatre at night." With the support of her sister and grandmother and help from gentlemen friends, she didn't need to work on a regular basis. She picked up day work when she was in a pinch and endured a six-week stretch of "Yes, Missus. I'll get to it" when coerced by need. So really, she was doing fine and had nearly perfected the art of surviving without having to scrape and bow. She hated being a servant, as did every general house-worker.

Service carried the stigma of slavery; white girls sought to avoid it for the same reason—it was *nigger work*. Had her employers suspected that the better the servant, the more severe the hatred of the mistress, Esther would not have been "entrusted to care for their precious darlings."

Why should she toil in a kitchen or factory in order to survive? Why should she work herself to the bone for white people? She preferred strolling along Harlem's wide avenues and losing herself in cabarets and movie houses. In the streets, young women and men displayed their talents and ambitions. It was better than staying home and staring at four walls. In Harlem, strolling was a fine art, *an everyday choreography of the possible* unfolded in the collective movement which was headless and spilling out in all directions, yet strollers drifted en masse, like a swarm or the swell of an ocean; it was a long poem of black hunger and striving. The bodies rushing through the block and idling on corners and hanging out on front steps were an assembly of the damned, the venturous, and the dangerous. *All modalities sang a part in this chorus* and the refrains were of infinite variety. On the avenues, the possibilities were glimmering and evanescent, even if fleet-

ing and most often unrealized. The map of the *might could* or *what might be* was not restricted to the literal trail of Esther's footsteps or anyone else's. Hers was an errant path cut through the heart of Harlem in search of the open city, *l'ouverture*, inside the ghetto. Wandering and drifting was how she engaged the world and how she perceived it. The thought of what might be possible was indistinguishable from moving bodies and the transient rush and flight of black folks in this city-within-the-city. Streetwalking in the black capital emboldened the wayward, shored up the weary, stoked the dreams of the wretched, and encouraged wanderlust.

As she drifted through the city, a thousand ideas about who she might be and what she might do rushed into her head, but she was uncertain what to make of them. Her thoughts were inchoate, fragmentary, wild. How they might become a blueprint for something better was unclear. Esther was fiercely intelligent. She had a bright, alert face and piercing eyes that announced her interest in the world. This combined with a noticeable pride made the seventeen-year-old appear substantial, a force in her own right. Even the white teachers at the training school, who disliked her and were reluctant to give a





colored girl any undue praise, conceded she was very smart, although quick to anger because of too much pride. She insisted on being treated no differently than the white girls, so they said she was trouble. The problem was not her capacity; it was her attitude. The brutality she experienced at the Hudson Training School for Girls taught her to fight back, to strike out. The teachers told the authorities that she had enjoyed too much freedom. It had ruined her and made her into the kind of young woman who would not hesitate *to smash things up*. Freedom in her hands, if not a crime, was a threat to public order and moral decency. *Excessive liberty had ruined her.* The social worker concurred, "With no social considerations to constrain her, she was ungovernable."

Esther Brown was wild and wayward. She longed for another way of living in the world. She was hungry for enough, for otherwise, for better. She was hungry for beauty. In her case, the aesthetic wasn't a realm separate and distinct from the daily challenges of survival, rather the aim was to make an art

of subsistence, a lyric of being young, poor, gifted, and black. Yet, she did not try to create a poem or song or painting. What she created was Esther Brown. *That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other. She would polish and hone that.* She would *celebrate that everyday something had tried to kill her and failed.* She would make a beautiful life. What was beauty if not "the intense sensation of being pulled toward the animating force of life?" Or the yearning "to bring things into relation . . . and with as much urgency as though one's life depended upon it." To the eyes of the world, her wild thoughts, dreams of another world, and longing to escape from drudgery were likely to lead to tumult and upheaval, to open rebellion. Esther Brown didn't need a husband or a daddy or a boss telling her what to do. But a young woman who flitted from job to job and lover to lover was considered immoral and destined to become a threat to the social order, a menace to society. The police detective said as much when he arrested Esther and her friends.

What the law designated as crime were the forms of life created by young black women in the city. The modes of intimacy and affiliation being fashioned in the ghetto, the refusal to labor, the forms of gathering and assembly, the practices of subsistence and getting over were under surveillance and targeted by the police as well as the sociologists and the reformers who gathered the information and made the case against them, forging their lives into tragic biographies of poverty, crime, and pathology. The activity required to reproduce and sustain life is, as Marx noted, a definite form of expressing life, it is an art of survival, social poesis. Subsistence—scraping by, getting over, making ends meet—entailed an ongoing struggle to produce a way to live in a context in which poverty was taken for granted and domestic work or general housework defined the only opportunity available to black girls and women. The acts of the wayward—the wild thoughts, reckless dreams, interminable protests, spontaneous strikes, nonparticipation, willfulness, and boldfaced refusal redistributed the balance of need and want and sought a line of escape from debt and duty in the attempt to create a path elsewhere.

*Mere survival* was an achievement in a context so brutal. How could one enhance life or speak of its potentialities when confined in the ghetto, when daily subjected to racist assault and insult, and conscripted to servitude? *How can I live?*—It was a question Esther reckoned with every day. Survival required acts of collaboration and genius. Esther's imagination was geared toward the clarification of life—"what would sustain material life and enhance it, something that entailed more than the reproduction of physical existence." The mutuality and creativity necessary to sustain life in the context of intermittent wages, controlled deprivation, economic exclusion, coercion, and antiblack violence often bordered on the extralegal and the criminal. Beautiful, wayward experiments entailed what W. E. B. Du Bois described as an "open rebellion" against society.

This speculative history of the wayward is an effort to narrate the open rebellion and beautiful experiment produced by young women in the emergent ghetto, a form of racial enclosure that succeeded the plantation. The narrative utilizes the reports and case files of the reformatory, private investiga-

tors, psychologists, and social workers to challenge the primary tenets of these accounts, the most basic of these assumptions being that the lives represented required intervention and rehabilitation and that the question—who are you?—is indistinguishable from one's status as a social problem. The method is critical fabulation. State violence, surveillance, and detention produce the archival traces and institutional records that inform the reconstruction of these lives; but desire and the want of something better decide the contours of the telling. The narrative emulates the errant path of the wayward and moves from one story to another by way of encounter, chance meeting, proximity, and the sociality created by enclosure. It strives to convey the aspiration and longing of the wayward and the tumult and upheaval incited by the chorus.

For the most part, the history of Esther and her friends and the potentiality of their lives has remained unthought because no one could imagine young black women as social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators in the world in which these acts took place. This latent history has yet to emerge: A *revolution in a minor key* unfolded in the city and young black women were its vehicle. It was driven not by uplift or the strug-

gle for recognition or citizenship, but by the vision of a world *that would guarantee to every human being free access to earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.* In this world, free love and free motherhood would not be criminalized and punished. To appreciate the beautiful experiments of Esther Brown and her friends, one needs first to conceive something as unimaginable and unprecedented as *too fast* girls and *surplus women* and *whores* producing "thought of the outside," that is, thought directed toward the outer bound of what is possible. Such far-reaching notions of *what could be* were the fruit of centuries of mutual aid, which was organized in stealth and paraded in public view.

Collaboration, reciprocity, and shared creation defined the practice of mutual aid. It was and remains a collective practice of survival for those bereft of the notion that life and land, human and earth could be owned, traded, and made the private property of anyone, those who would never be self-possessed, or envision themselves as acquisitive self-interested proprietors, or measure their life and worth by the ledger or the rent book, or long to be the settler or the master. Mutual

aid did not traffic in the belief that the self existed distinct and apart from others or revere the ideas of individuality and sovereignty, as much as it did singularity and freedom. The mutual aid society survived the Middle Passage and its origins might be traced to traditions of collectivity, which flourished in the stateless societies that preceded the breach of the Atlantic and perdured in its wake. This form of mutual assistance was remade in the hold of the slave ship, the plantation, and the ghetto. It made good the ideals of the commons, the collective, the ensemble, the always-more-than-one of existing in the world. The mutual aid society was a resource of black survival. The ongoing and open-ended creation of new conditions of existence and the improvisation of life-enhancing and free association was a practice crafted in social clubs, tenements, taverns, dance halls, disorderly houses, and the streets.

Esther had been working for two days as a live-in domestic on Long Island when she decided to return to Harlem to see her baby and have some fun. It was summer and Harlem was alive. She visited her son and grandmother, but stayed at her friend



Josephine's place because she always had a house full of folks dancing, drinking, carousing, and vamping. Esther had planned to return to her job the next day, but one day stretched into several. People tended to lose track of time at Josephine's place. 5 West 134th street had a reputation as a building for lover's secret assignations, house parties, and gambling. The apartment was in the thick of it, right off Fifth Avenue in the blocks of Harlem tightly packed with crowded tenements and subject to frequent police raids. Esther was playing cards when Rebecca arrived with Krause, who said he had a friend he wanted her to meet. She didn't feel like going out, but they kept pestering her and Josephine encouraged her to give it a try. Why not have some fun?

Do you want to have a good time? Brady asked. Rebecca gave him the once-over. A smile and the promise of some fun was all the encouragement Rebecca needed. Esther didn't care one way or the other. She suggested they go back to Josephine's, but Brady didn't want to, so they decided to hang out in the hallway of a nearby building. A tenement hallway was as good

as any lounge. In the dark passage, Brady snuggled up with Rebecca, while his friend tried to pair up with Esther. Krause asked Brady for fifty cents to go buy some liquor. That was when Brady said he was a detective. Krause took off quick, as if he knew what was coming as soon as the man opened his mouth. He would have gotten away if Brady hadn't shot him in the foot.

At the precinct, Detective Brady charged Krause with White Slavery, and Esther and Rebecca with Violation of the Tenement House Law. They were taken from the precinct to the Jefferson Market Court for an arraignment. Because they were seventeen years old and didn't have any previous offenses they were sent to the Empire Friendly Shelter while they awaited trial, rather than confined in the Tombs, which was what everyone called the prison cells next to the Jefferson courthouse. A day later the charges were dismissed against Krause because the other detective failed to appear in court. They were waiting to appear before the judge when Krause sent word that he was free. Esther and Rebecca wouldn't be so lucky. It was hard to call the cursory proceedings and routine indifference at the Women's Court a hearing, since the

magistrate court had no jury, produced no written record of the events, required no evidence but the police officer's word, failed to consider the intentions of the accused, or even to require the commitment of a criminal act. *The likelihood of future criminality* decided their sentence rather than any violation of the law. The magistrate judge barely looked at the two colored girls before sentencing them to three years at the reformatory. The social worker recommended they be sent to Bedford Hills to rescue them from a life in the streets.

Harlem was swarming with vice-investigators and undercover detectives and do-gooders who were all intent on keeping young black women off the streets, even if it meant arresting every last one of them. Street strollers, exhausted domestics, nocturnal creatures, wannabe chorus girls, and too loud colored women were arrested on a whim or suspicion or likelihood. In custody, the reasons for arrest were offered: Loitering. Riotous and Disorderly. Solicitation. Violation of the Tenement House Law. Who knew that being too loud, or loitering in the hallway of your building or on the front stoop was a vio-

lation of the law; or making a date with someone you met at the club, or arranging a casual hookup, or running the streets was prostitution? Or sharing a flat with ten friends was criminal anarchy? Or the place where you stayed was a disorderly house, and could be raided at any moment? The real offense was blackness. Your status made you a criminal. The telltale sign of future criminality was a dark face.

Until the night of July 17, 1917, Esther Brown had been lucky and eluded the police, although she had been under their gaze all the while. The willingness to have a good time with a stranger or the likelihood of engaging in an immoral act—sexual intimacy outside of marriage—was sufficient evidence of wrongdoing. To be willing or *willful* was the offense to be punished. The only way to counter the presumption of wrongdoing and establish innocence was to give a good account of one's self. Esther failed to do this as did many young women who passed through the court. It didn't matter that Esther had not solicited Krause or asked for or accepted any money. She assumed she was innocent, but the Women's Court found otherwise. Esther's inability to give an account of herself, capable of justifying and explaining how she lived or, at least,

willing to atone for her failures and deviations, was among the offenses levied against her. She readily admitted that she hated to work, not bothering to distinguish between the conditions of work available to her and some ideal of work that she and none she knew had ever experienced. She was convicted because she was unemployed and “leading the life of a prostitute.” One could lead the life of a prostitute without actually being one.

With no proof of employment, Esther was indicted for vagrancy under the Tenement House Law. Vagrancy was an expansive and virtually all-encompassing category, like *the manner of walking* in Ferguson, it was a ubiquitous charge that made it easy for the police to arrest and prosecute young women with no evidence of crime or act of lawbreaking. In the 1910s and 1920s, vagrancy statutes were used primarily to target young women for prostitution. To be charged was to be sentenced since the Women's Court had the highest rate of conviction of all the New York City courts. Nearly 80 percent of those who appeared before the magistrate judge were sentenced to serve time. It didn't matter if it was your first encounter with the law. Vagrancy statutes and tenement house

laws made young black women vulnerable to arrest and transformed sexual acts, even consensual ones with no cash exchanging hands, into criminal offenses. What mattered was not what you had done, but the prophetic power of the police to predict future crime, to anticipate the mug shot in the bright eyes and intelligent face of Esther Brown.

## *The Future of Involuntary Servitude*

In 1349, the first vagrancy statute was passed in England. The law was a response to the shortage of labor in the aftermath of the Black Death and it was designed to conscript those who refused to labor. The vagrancy laws of England were adopted in the North American colonies and invigorated with a new force and scope after Emancipation and the demise of Reconstruction. They replaced the Black Codes, which had been deemed unconstitutional, but resurrected involuntary servitude in guises amenable to the terms liberty and equality.

In the South, vagrancy laws became a surrogate for slavery, forcing ex-slaves to remain on the plantation and radically restricting their movement, recreating slavery in all but name.

In northern cities, vagrancy statutes too were intended to compel the labor of the idle, and, more importantly, to control the propertyless. Those without proof of employment were considered *likely to commit* or be involved in vice and crime. Vagrancy statutes provided the legal means to master the newly masterless. The origins of the workhouse and the house of correction can be traced to these efforts to force the recalcitrant to labor, to manage and regulate the ex-serf and ex-slave when lordship and bondage assumed a more indirect form. The statutes restricted and regulated black movement and punished the forms of intimacy that could not be categorized or settled by the question: *Is this man your husband*? Those without proof of employment and refusing to labor were in all likelihood guilty of crime—vagrancy or prostitution.

Vagrancy was a status, not a crime. It was *not* doing, withholding, non-participation, the refusal to be settled or bound by contract to husband or employer. This refusal of a social order based on monogamous marriage or wage labor was penalized. Common law defined the vagrant as "someone who wandered about without visible means of support." William Blackstone in his 1765 *Commentaries on the Law of England*

defined vagrants as those who "wake on the night and sleep in the day and haunt taverns and ale-houses and roust about; and no man knows from where they came or whither they go." The statutes targeted those who maintained excessive notions of freedom and imagined that liberty included the right *not* to work. In short, vagrants were the deracinated—migrants, wanderers, displaced persons, and strangers.

Status offenses were critical to the remaking of a racist order in the aftermath of slavery and accelerated the growing disparity between black and white rates of incarceration in northern cities at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the legal transformation from slavery to freedom is most often narrated as the shift from status to contract, from property to subject, from slave to Negro, vagrancy statutes make apparent the continuities and entanglements between a diverse range of unfree states—from slave to servant, from servant to vagrant, from domestic to prisoner, from idler to convict and felon. Involuntary servitude wasn't one condition—chattel slavery—nor was it fixed in time and place; rather it was an ever-changing mode of exploitation, domination, accumulation (the severing of will, the theft of capacity, the appro-

priation of life), and confinement. Antiblack racism fundamentally shaped the development of "status criminality." In turn, status criminality was tethered ineradicably to blackness.

Not quite two centuries after the conspiracy to burn down New York was hatched at a black-and-tan dive called Hughson's Tavern, black assembly and the threat of tumult still made New York's ruling elite quake in fear. The state was as intent on preventing the dangers and consequences posed by *Negroes assembled in a riotous manner*. Gatherings that were too loud or too unruly or too queer; hotels and cabarets that welcomed black and white patrons; black-and-tan dives frequented by Chinese men and white girls or black women with Italian paramours; or house parties and buffet flats offering refuge to pansies, lady lovers, and inverts—were deemed disorderly, promiscuous, and morally depraved. These forms of intimate association and unregulated assembly threatened the public good by transgressing the color line and eschewing the dominant mores. The lives of the wayward were riotous, queer, disposed to extravagance and wanton living. This promiscuous sociality fueled a moral panic identified and mobilized by the city's ruling elite to justify the extravagant use of police power.

Penal laws against disorderly conduct, disorderly houses, disorderly persons, unlawful assembly, criminal anarchy, and vagrancy were intended to regulate intimacy and association, police styles of comportment, dictate how one assumed a gender and who one loved, and thwart free movement and errant paths through the city.

Esther Brown was confronted with a choice that was no choice at all: volunteer for servitude or be commanded by the law. Vagrancy statutes were implemented and expanded to conscript young colored women to domestic work and regulate them in proper households, that is, male-headed households, with a proper *he*, not merely someone pretending to be a husband or merely outfitted like a man, not lovers passing for sisters or a pretend *Mrs.* shacking up with a boarder, not households comprising three women and a child. For state authorities, black homes were disorderly houses as they were marked by the taint of promiscuity, pathology, and illegality, sheltering nameless children and strangers, nurturing intimacy outside the bounds of the law, not organized by the sexual dyad, and not ruled by the father; and producing criminals not citizens. The domestic was the locus of danger; it threat-



ened social reproduction rather than ensured it. *Is this man your husband? Where is the father of your child?* Such questions, if not answered properly, might land you in the workhouse or reformatory. With incredible ferocity, state surveillance and police power acted to shape the black household and regulate intimate life. Affiliation and kinship organized along alternate lines, *an open mesh of possibilities*, was suspect and likely to yield crime. The discretionary power granted the police in discerning *future crime* would have an enormous impact on black social life and the making of the ghetto.

The plantation, the ghetto, and the prison were coeval; one mode of confinement and enclosure did not supersede the other, but extended the state of servitude, violence, and death in a new guise. The afterlife of slavery unfolded in a tenement hallway and held Esther Brown in its grasp. Plainly put, the Negro problem in the North was the arrival of the ex-slave in the city, and the moral panic and the race riots that erupted across the country document the reach of the plantation and the enduring status of the black as fungible life, eternal alien, and noncitizen.

The plantation was not abolished, but transformed. The problem of crime was the threat posed by the black presence in the city; the problem of crime was the wild experiment in black freedom; and the efforts to manage and regulate this crisis provided a means of solidifying and extending the color line that defined urban space, reproducing the disavowed apartheid of everyday life.

State violence, incarceration, and controlled depletion defined the world that Esther Brown wanted to destroy. It made her the sort of girl who would not hesitate to smash things up.

## *Contraband Love*

The letter her ex-husband sent didn't say if the article appeared in the metro column of *The Amsterdam News* or the "New York City News Briefs" in *The Chicago Defender* or the City News section of the *New York Herald*, in which case only a few lines dedicated to the when, where, and how would have appeared, just the cold hard facts, perhaps accompanied by statistics that documented the rising rate of prostitution, or

the increasing numbers of young colored women arrested for solicitation and violation of the Tenement House Law. It would not have been a showy or sensationalist headline like *Silk and Lights Blamed for Harlem's Girl Demise* or a lead story of moral crisis and sexual panic manufactured by vice commissions and urban reformers. If the details were especially sordid, a column or two might be devoted to a young woman's demise.

All her ex-husband said was that "a rush of sadness and disbelief had washed over him" as he tried to figure out how *his Esther, his baby,* had come to be involved in such trouble. He encouraged her to be a good girl and he promised to take care of her when she was released, something he had failed to do in the few months they lived together as husband and wife in her mother's home. Now that it was too late, he was trying to be steady. The letter was posted on army stationery and it was filled with assurances about his love, promises about trying to be a better man and pleading that she try to do better. *You will not live happy,* he cautioned, *until [your] wild world end.* He hoped she had learned a *long lost lesson in the wild world of fun and pleasure.*

Esther's grandmother and sister didn't know that she had been arrested until they saw her name in the daily newspaper. They were in disbelief. It wasn't true. It couldn't be. Anyone in Harlem could tell you that stool pigeons were paid to lie. Everyone knew Krause was working for the cops. He would sell his own mama for a dollar. Besides, if anyone was to blame for Esther's trouble, her grandmother thought, it was her mother, Rose. She was jealous of the girl, mostly because of the attention paid to Esther by the men boarding in the rented rooms of her flat. Rose was living with one of them as her husband, although the relation, properly speaking, was outside the bounds of the law.

When Rose heard the news of her daughter's arrest it confirmed what she believed: The girl was headed for trouble. Some time in the country and not running the streets might steady her, she confided to the social worker, tipping the hand that would decide her daughter's fate. What passed for maternal concern was a long list of complaints about Esther's manner of living. Rose told the colored probation officer, Miss Campbell, that her daughter had "never worked more than six weeks at a time and usually stayed in a place only a couple of

weeks." She just wouldn't stay put or keep a job. She had a good husband and she left him. She was young and flighty and did not want to be tied down to one husband. What more was there to say?

The neighbors told a different story. *The mother is the one who needs to be sent away*. Everyone knew Rose Saunders consorted with one of the men who lodged in her apartment. "What kind of example is that for a girl? That's no straight road."

The letter from Esther's girlfriend was nothing like her husband's. It didn't plead for her to be a good girl or beg her to leave the wild world behind or caution her to take the straight road, but instead reminded her of all the pleasures awaiting her when she received her *free papers*, not the least of these being Alice's love:

**Dear Little Girl, Just a few lines to let you know that everything is o.k. I suppose you think I was foolish to leave Peekskill but I could not stand the work. I have not been used to working so hard when I leave Bedford and why should I do so when I don't have to, you stay where you are as you expect to live in New York when you are free. . . . It will surprise you, I am going to be married next month, not**

**that I care much but for protection. I went to New York Sunday and seen quite a number of old friends and heard all the scandal and then some . . . New York is wide open, plenty of white stuff & everything you want so cheer up there are plenty of good times in store for you. So I must close with the same old love wishing you well.**

It is not clear if Esther had the chance to read Alice's letter. This missive of contraband love was seized by prison authorities and included with the disciplinary reports and the notes from the staff meetings, augmenting the folio of documents that formed the case file and invited greater punishment.

**Attitude: She is inclined to be sullen and defiant. Came to Bedford with the impression that this was a very bad place and decided that she would not let any of the matrons run over her." She said "If they keep yelling at her they'll find that isn't the way to treat Esther Brown." And "Esther Brown isn't going to stand for that."**

**Note: Patient is a colored girl with good mentality who has had her own way and enjoyed much freedom. The influence of her family and her environment have both been bad. She is the hyperkinetic type which craves continually activity and amusement.**



## Riot and Refrain

The reporters were most interested in what happened to the white girls. Ruth Carter, Stella Kramer, and Maizie Rice were the names that appeared in the newspapers. Ruth was the first one to tell the State Prison Commission about the terrible things done to them at Bedford Hills: they were handcuffed in the cells of Rebecca Halls, they were stripped and their mouths gagged with dirty rags and harsh soap, they were beaten with rubber hoses and handcuffed to their cots, they were hung from the doors of their cells with their feet barely reaching the ground, they were given the “water treatment” and their faces immersed in water until they could hardly breathe, they were isolated for weeks and months behind the double doors of the cells in the Disciplinary Building. The double door prevented any light from entering and the lack of air made the dank smell of the dark chamber and their waste and rank unwashed bodies unbearable. The stench, the sensory deprivation, and the isolation were intended to break them.

There were two hundred and sixty-five inmates and twenty-one babies. The young women ranged in age from fourteen to

thirty and the majority were city girls exiled to the country for moral reform. They came from crowded tenements. Eighty percent of the young women at Bedford had been subjected to some form of punishment—confined in their rooms for a week, confined in the cells of Rebecca Hall, confined in the Disciplinary Building. Even the State Prison Commission was forced to concede it was cruel and unusual punishment. It was a reformatory in name only and there was nothing modern or therapeutic about its disciplinary measures. When asked if hanging girls up, handcuffing them, and beating them with hoses was abusive, one matron replied: "If you don't quell them or rule them with an iron hand you cannot live with these people." When questioned as to why she failed to mention such punishments, the prison superintendent, Miss Helen Cobb, responded that she hadn't mentioned such practices because she considered them "treatment," not punishment.

The smallest infractions invited brutality: a complaint about dinner, a sheet of stationery found tucked under a mattress, or dancing in a lewd manner might be punished with a week locked in your room or confined in Rebecca Hall or stripped and tied to a cell door in the Disciplinary building.

Black girls were more likely to be punished and to be punished more harshly.

Loretta Michie was the only colored girl quoted in the newspaper article. The prison authorities resented that the inmates had been named at all. It fueled the public hysteria about the abuses and endowed the atrocities with a face and a story. Loretta and several other black women testified before the State Prison Commission about how Miss Cobb and Miss Minogue treated them. Perhaps it was the sixteen-year-old's curly hair, dark brown eyes, and pretty face that caught the attention of the reporters and prompted them to record her name. Perhaps it was the graphic account of brutality that made her words more noteworthy than the others. Did she describe more vividly the utter aloneness of the dungeon—how it felt to be cut off from the world and cast out again, and that in the darkness shouting out and hearing the voices of others was your lifeline; or how your heart raced because you were afraid you might drown, even when you knew it was just a pail of water, but hell it might as well have been the Atlantic. The fight to breathe waged again. How long could one live under water? The world went black and when your eyes opened you

were beached on the dark floor of an isolation cell. Was the body suspended from the door of a neighboring cell yours too? The pain moving and cutting across the body shared by all those confined in the ten cells of the D.B.? The newspaper offered a pared-down description: Loretta Michie testified that she had been "handcuffed to the bars of her cell, with the tips of her toes touching the floor, for so long that she fell when she was released." She also noted that the colored girls were assigned to the worst jobs in the kitchen, the laundry, and the psychiatric unit.

Other women reported being stripped and tied naked to their cots, they were fed bread and water for a week, they were strung up and suspended in their cells, denied even the small relief of toes touching the ground. Esther too could have told them about Rebecca Hall; like Loretta Michie she had been confined in the Disciplinary Building several times; she could have told them about Peter Quinn and the others slapping and kicking the girls had she been asked to appear. But Peter Quinn didn't need anybody to testify against him. He was one of the few guards who owned up to some of the terrible things he had done, mostly to make Miss Cobb look bad. By

his own admission, he helped string up girls about one hundred times. He was the one who "showed Miss Minogue how to first handcuff a girl to the cell partition with her hands back of her, and that he knows that at that time the feet were always wholly on the floor." Under the direction of Miss Minogue the practice "just grew" to lift them a little higher.

In December 1919, the women in Lowell Cottage made their voices heard even if no one wanted to listen. Lowell, Flowers, Gibbons, Sanford, and Harriman were the cottages reserved for black prisoners. After a scandal about interracial sex and "harmful intimacy" erupted in 1914, segregation had been imposed and cottages sorted by race as well as age, status, addiction, and capacity. A special provision of the Charities Law permitted the state to practice racial segregation while safeguarding it from legal claims that such practices were unconstitutional and a violation of the state's civil rights laws.

The newspaper described the upheaval and resistance of Lowell Cottage as a sonic revolt, a "noise strike," the "din of an infernal chorus." Collectively the prisoners had grown weary of gratuitous violence and being punished for trifles, so they sought retribution in noise and destruction. They

tossed their mattresses, they broke windows, they set fires. Nearly everyone in the cottage was shouting and screaming and crying out to whoever would listen. They pounded the walls with their fists, finding a shared and steady rhythm that they hoped might topple the cottage, make the walls crumble, smash the cots, destroy the reformatory so that it would never be capable of holding another "innocent girl in the jailhouse." The "wailing shrieking chorus" protested the conditions of the prison, insisted they had done nothing to justify confinement; they refused to be treated as if they were not human, as if they were waste. The *New York Times* reported: "The noise was deafening. Almost every window of the cottage was crowded with Negro women who were shouting, angry and laughing hysterically. The uproarious din emanating from the cottage smote the ears of the investigators before they got within sight of the building." Songs and shouts were the vehicle of struggle.

The chorus spoke with one voice. All of them screamed and cried about the unfairness of being sentenced to Bedford, being arrested in a frame-up, the three years of life stolen. Were they nothing or nobody? Could they be seized and cast away and no one in the world would care or even give a damn?



Were Harriman and Gibbons and Sanford and Flowers also up in arms? A month after Miss Minogue put her in a chokehold, beat her head with a set of keys, pummeled her with a rubber hose, Mattie Jackson joined the chorus. Thinking about her son and how he was growing up without her made her wail and shout louder. It is not that she or any of the others imagined that their pleas and complaints would gain a hearing outside the cottage or that the findings of the New York State Commission of Prisons would make any difference for them. This riot, like the ones that preceded it and the ones that would follow in its wake, was not unusual. What was unusual was that the riot had been reported at all. The state investigation of abuse and torture at the reformatory made rioting colored women a newsworthy topic.

Loretta, or Mickey as some of her friends called her, beat the walls, bellowed, cursed, and screamed. At fourteen years old, before she had her first period, before she had a lover, before she penned lines like "sweetheart in my dreams I'm calling you," Mickey waged a small battle against the prison and the damned police and the matrons and the parole officers and the social workers. She was unwilling to pretend that her

keepers were anything else. The cottages were not homes. Miss Cobb didn't give a damn about her and Miss Minogue was a thug in a skirt. The matrons were brutes and not there to guide or provide counsel or assist them in making better lives, but to manage and control, punish and inflict harm. They let you know what they thought: You were being treated too well and each cruel punishment was deserved and the only way to communicate with the inmates, especially the colored girls. Miss Dawley, the sociologist, interviewed them. She asked questions and wrote down everything they said, but her recommendation was always the same: Prison is the only place for her.

Mickey rebelled without knowing the awful things the staff said about her in their meetings—she was simple-minded and a liar, she thought too much of herself, "she had been with a good many men." The psychologist, Dr. Spaulding, said she was trying to appear young and innocent, but clearly wasn't. Was it possible that she was just fourteen years old? Miss Cobb decided the matter: "Let's just assume she is eighteen." Everyone believed prison was the best place for a young black woman on an errant path.

Staying out all night at a dance with her friends and steal-

ing $2.00 to buy a new dress so she could perform on stage were sufficient cause to commit her. Mickey cursed and pummeled the wall with her fist and refused to stop no matter how tired. She didn't care if they threw her in the Disciplinary Building every single day, she would never stop fighting them, she would never submit.

**Disciplinary Report: Very troublesome. She has been in Rebecca Hall and the Disciplinary Building. Punished continually. Friendship with the white girls.**

She had been in the D.B. more times than her disciplinary sheet revealed. In Rebecca Hall, she schemed and plotted and incited the other girls to rioting and disorder. She was proud to have been the cause of considerable trouble her entire time at Bedford. When confined in the prison buildings, she managed to send a few letters to her girlfriend. The love letter seized by the matron was written in pencil on toilet paper because she was not allowed pen and paper in confinement. The missive to her girlfriend Catherine referred to the earlier riots of 1917 and 1918 and expressed the spirit of rage and resistance that fueled the December action in Lowell:

**I get so utterly disgusted with these god d—— cops I could kill them. They may run Bedford and they may run some of the pussies in Bedford but they are never going to run Loretta Michie. . . . It doesn't pay to be a good fellow in a joint of this kind, but I don't regret anything I ever done I have been to prison (Rebecca Hall) three times and D.B. once and may go again soon and a few others and myself always got the Dirty End. Everytime prison would cut up in 1918 or 1917 when police came up whether we were cutting up or not we were [there]. . . . They would always string us up or put us in the Stairway sheets but we would cut up all the more. Those were the days when J.M. [Julia Minogue] was kept up all night and all day we would wait until she go to bed about 1 o'clock at night and then we would start and then we would quiet down about 4 o'clock and start again about 8 in the morning. . . . Then there was a good gang here then we could have those days back again 'if' we only had the women but we haven't so why bother. . . . I have only one more day but when you've had as much punishment as I have you don't mind it. Well the Lights are being extinguished so Good Night and Sweet pleasant dreams. Loyally yours, Black Eyes or Mickey**

Lowell Cottage roared with the sounds of upheaval and revolt. They smashed the windows of the cottage. Broken windows

linked the disorder of the prison to the ghetto, explained the sociologist in a lecture on the culture of poverty. Glints and shards of shattered glass were the language of the riot. Furniture was destroyed. Walls were defaced. Fires started. Like Esther Brown, Mickey didn't hesitate to smash things up. The cottage mates yelled and shouted and cursed for hours. Each voice blended with the others in a common tongue. Every utterance and shout made plain the truth: Riot was the only remedy within reach.

It was the dangerous music of upheaval. En masse they announced what had been endured, what they wanted, what they intended to destroy. Bawling and screaming and cursing made the cottage tremble and corralled them together into one large pulsing formation, an ensemble reveling in the beauty of the strike. Young women hanging out of the windows, crowding at the doors, and huddling on shared beds sounded a complete revolution, an upheaval of the given, an undoing and remaking of values, which called property and law and social order into crisis. They sought redress among

themselves. The call and the appeal transformed them from prisoners into rioters, from inmates to fugitives, even if only for thirteen hours. In the discordant assembly, they found a hearing in one another.

The *black noise* emanating from Lowell Cottage expressed their rage and their longing. It made manifest the latent rebellion simmering beneath the surface of things. It provided the language in which "they lamented their lot and what they called the injustice of their keepers at the top of their voices." To those outside the circle it was a din without melody or center. The *New York Times* had trouble deciding which among the sensational headlines it should use for the article, so it went with three: "Devil's Chorus Sung by Girl Rioters." "Bedford Hears Mingled Shrieks and Squeals, Suggesting Inferno Set to Jaz[z]." "Outbreak Purely Vocal." What exactly did Dante's Inferno sound like when transposed into a jazz suite? For the white world, jazz was a synonym for primal sound and savage modernism. It was raw energy and excitement, nonsense and jargon, empty talk, excess, carnal desire: It was slang for copulation and conjured social disorder and free love rather than composition or improvisation.

**You can take my tie**
**You can take my collar**
**But I'll jazz you**
**Till you holler**

Sonic tumult and upheaval—resistance as music had to be construed as jazz. It was the only frame to make legible their utterances. In the most basic sense, the sounds emanating from Lowell were the free music of those in captivity, the abolition philosophy expressed within the circle. If freedom and mutual creation defined the music, so too did it define the strike and riot waged by the prisoners of Lowell. "The Reformatory Blues," a facile label coined by the daily newspapers to describe the collective refusal of prison conditions, was Dante filtered through Ma Rainey and Buddy Bolden. Their utterances were marked by the long history of black radical sound—whoops and hollers, shrieks and squawks, sorrow songs and blues. It was the sound track to a history that hurt.

The chants and cries escaped the confines of the prison, even if their bodies did not: "Almost every window [of the cottage] was crowded with negro women who were shouting, cry-

ing, and laughing hysterically." Few outside the circle understood the deep resources of this hue and cry. The aesthetic inheritance of "jargon and nonsense" was nothing if not a philosophy of freedom that reached back to slave songs and circle dances—struggle and flight, death and refusal became music or moaning or joyful noise or discordant sound.

For those within this circle, every groan and cry, curse and shout insisted slavery time was over. They were tired of being abused and confined, and they wanted to be free. Those exact words could be found in the letters written by their mothers and husbands and girlfriends: "I tell you Miss Cobb, it is no slave time with colored people now." All of them might well have shouted, *No slave time now. Abolition now*. In *the surreal, utopian nonsense of it all*, and at the heart of riot, was the anarchy of colored girls: treason en masse, tumult, gathering together, the mutual collaboration required to confront the prison authorities and the police, the willingness to lose oneself and become something greater—a chorus, a swarm, an ensemble, a mutual aid society. In lieu of an explanation or an appeal, they shouted and stomped and screamed. How else were they to express the longing to be free? How else were they to make plain their refusal to be governed?

Outsiders described the din as a swan song, to signal that their defeat was certain and they would return to their former state as prisoners without a voice in the world and to whom anything might be done. There was little that was mournful in the chants and curses, the hollers and squawks. This collective utterance was not a dirge. As they crowded in the windows of the cottage, some hanging out and others peeking from the corners, the dangerous music of black life was unleashed from within the space of captivity; it was a raucous polyphonic utterance that sounded beautiful and terrible. Before the riot was quashed, its force touched everyone on the grounds of the prison and as far away as the tenements, rented rooms, and ramshackle lodging houses of Harlem, Brooklyn, and Staten Island.

The noise conveyed the defeat and the aspiration, the beauty and the wretchedness, which was otherwise inaudible to the ears of the world; it revealed a sensibility at odds with the institution's brutal realism. What to make of the utopian impulse that enabled them to believe that anyone cared about what they had to say? What convinced them that the force of their collective utterance was capable of turning anything around? What urged them to create a reservoir of living within

the prison's mandated death? What made them tireless? The next month, the prisoners confined in Rebecca Hall waged another noise strike. "Prisoners began to jangle their cell doors, throw furniture against the walls, scream, sing, and use profanity. In the opinion of one of the noisemakers, "the medley of sounds, 'the Reformatory Blues,' may yet make a hit on Broadway, even if the officials appear to disdain jazz." They carried on all night in the prison building. They rioted again in July, August, and November.

The chants and cries insisted: We want to be free. The strike begged the question: Why are we locked up here? Why have you stolen our lives? Why do you beat us like dogs? Starve us? Pull our hair from our heads? Gag us? Club us over the head? It isn't right to take our lives. No one deserved to be treated like this.

All those listening on the outside could discern were: "gales of catcalls, hurricanes of screams, cyclones of rage, tornadoes of squalls." The sounds yielded to "one hair-raising, ear-testing Devil's chorus." Those inside the circle listened for the love and disappointment, the longing and the outrage that fueled this collective utterance. They channeled the fears and the

hopes of the ones who loved them, the bad dreams and the nightmares about children stolen away by white men and lost at sea. The refrains were redolent with all the lovely plans about what they would do once they were free. These sounds traveled through the night air.





# Voices in t

# he Chorus

This speculative history of Esther Brown is based on the "Statement of the Girl," the interviews with her family members, the verified history, personal and institutional correspondence, notes of staff meetings found in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Collection, 14610–77B Inmate Case Files, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives. The New York State Archives required that the names of the prisoners be changed to maintain the privacy of the records. See Inmate File numbers 2507, 2503, 2466, and 4092. The Bedford files are very detailed, particularly until the year 1920, when the Laboratory of Social Hygiene conducted extensive intake interviews of the girls and women upon their arrival. The intake process included personal interviews, family histories, interviews with neighbors, employers, and teachers, psychological tests, physical examinations, intelligence tests, social investigators' reports, as well as the reports of probation officers, school report cards, letters from former employers, and other state records (from training schools and orphanages). After a two-week evaluation of the compiled materials,

physicians, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, and prison superintendents met to discuss each individual case. The files contain personal correspondence, discussions of sexual history, life experiences, family background, hobbies, as well as poems and plays written by the prisoners. The case file intended to produce deep knowledge of the individual in a genre that combined sociological investigation with literary fiction creating a statistical portrait of the young women. The importance of the case file was critical to prison reform and the idea that probation, punishment, and parole must be individually suited to each offender; this approach favored indeterminate sentencing. In practice, this meant that a young woman charged with status offenses, with the likelihood of future criminality or the likelihood of becoming morally depraved, might spend three years confined at Bedford and be entangled with the criminal justice system and under state surveillance for a decade of her life. The case file was grounded in a hermeneutics of suspicion and a horizon of reform. It was an exemplary product of the therapeutic state.

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***The very idea of work***: Narrative drawn from "Information concerning the Patient," August 12, 1917; "Information concerning the Patient," September 15, 1917. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Inmate case files. Series 14610–77B. Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives, Albany. Bedford Hills Case File #2507.

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***Like a swarm or swell of the ocean***: Du Bois described the collective action of the general strike as a swarm or swell. See Du Bois, W. E. B. 1998. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

***All modalities sing apart***: de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 99.

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*Americans in New York Life and History* 30, no. 2: 153–71; Cervenak, Sarah. 2015. *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 2; Bruno, Giuliana. 1993. *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

***l'ouverture*** is another way to think about tumult, upheaval, and the radical practice of everyday life. It is also a reference to the revolutionary practice of the enslaved.

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